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Reagan Shelves Requirement for Polygraph Tests

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President Reagan, acting at the behest of chief of staff James A. Baker III and other White House aides, has suspended key parts of a controversial national security directive he signed last March to step up use of polygraph tests in investigations of leaks and impose lifetime censorship on government employees with access to highly classified information.

Congress last year blocked implementation of the provisions until April 15. Administration sources said they will probably stay shelved now at least until after the Nov. 6 election, and possibly permanently.

In place of the canceled provisions, spokesman Larry Speakes said the White House now wants to negotiate a "bipartisan solution" with Congress "to the problem of safeguarding classified information."

An aide to Sen. Charles McC. Mathias Jr. (R-Md.), who led the effort to block the Reagan order, yesterday said a compromise was possible but could not include any "pre-publication review" of the sort that Reagan proposed.

The president's decision, which Speakes said was made in the last few days, comes as the Senate Judiciary Committee is preparing to begin hearings Feb. 29 on the nomination of White House counselor Edwin Meese III to be attorney general.

Administration officials said previously that they feared the security directive would become an issue in the Meese hearings. Mathias, a ranking member of the Judiciary Committee, had indicated his intent to make the order an issue in the proceedings.

Meese had been a supporter of the Reagan effort to stop news "leaks," but chief of staff Baker was opposed to the restrictive polygraph provisions and lifetime censorship provisions that

would have been applied to government employees in sensitive positions, even after they had left the government.

Officials said Baker played a key role in Reagan's decision to suspend the two provisions, which had drawn fire from members of Congress and civil liberties groups.

The White House announced that Reagan was suspending two parts of the controversial order: a requirement that 127,500 government workers who deal with highly classified material clear all writings and prepared speeches with government censors for life, and a provision that greatly expanded the use of polygraph tests in unauthorized disclosures.

In taking the action, Speakes said Reagan was not abandoning his insistence that tighter controls be placed on national security information and remains "convinced that at present there are insufficient protections for classified information and that as a result our national security is potentially compromised."

The president last fall ordered a Justice Department investigation of members of his senior staff to try to find the source of news reports about the Mideast that some aides claimed had endangered national security. The investigation ended inconclusively.

A White House official said yesterday that Reagan is still convinced that there are not enough protections for "sensitive compartmentalized information," which is among the most secret the government has.

The official said Reagan wanted Congress to "join with us in developing more adequate measures to address the serious and continuing problem of unauthorized disclosures," but he could cite no examples of the problem.

Reagan issued National Security Decision Directive 84 last March. It would have required about 128,000 government workers to sign agreements to submit their public utterances to censorship for life.

This requirement has been in effect in the intelligence community. Reagan would have expanded it.

The order disturbed some senior White House officials, none of whom signed it. The Republican-controlled Senate voted 56 to 34 last October to delay the plan for six months. Hearings are scheduled on the issue Feb. 23 in the Senate.